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SUBJECT: FRANCE ON CHAD: DEBY'S THE MAIN MAN

REF: 11/9 BALL-D'ELIA E-MAIL

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah B. Rosenblatt. Reassess 1.4b,d

1. (C) Summary: For Michael Deslaimes, the French MFA Chad and Togo Desk Officer, Idriss Deby's Presidency is "indispensable" to the tenuous stability of a hodgepodge country in continual tribal ferment. Deslaimes told Africa Watcher November 15 that Deby is the right choice -- the only option -- for the next election cycle in 2006. Deslaimes labeled efforts to nurture alternative presidential candidates misguided. Guidance request para 6. End Summary.

2. (C) Deby offers the best chance for reform in Chad, according to Deslaimes, who singled out the importance of military reform. Deby's plan to retire 15,000 troops and recruit 10,000 new troops in their stead was a roadmap for the "de-ethnicization" of the military. In Deslaimes' view, the draft legal program to manage and allocate oil revenue was also groundbreaking, especially when seen in a regional context. Gabon's Bongo, who would never consider anything similar, found the whole initiative a big laugh. Although the plan would put more revenue into the state treasury, the principle of transparent allocations was remarkable, and went well beyond World Bank expectations, Deslaimes remarked. The plan carried political risk as well, exacerbating the discontent of Zaghawa critics who are already losing out on revenue. Deby's reform of family law was another touchy matter, chiefly because it revises Islamic-related inheritance customs. Deslaimes went so far as to describe Deby as "the guarantor" of "laicite" (secularism) in Chad, preventing Islamization and religious-based conflict.

3. (C) Deby's reform efforts deserve credit and require international assistance, Deslaimes averred. France already provides an adviser to the Finance Ministry and would soon dispatch two additional advisers to assist with budgetary administration. Deslaimes asked that the USG consider taking similar actions. He recommended a coordinated international effort to provide, detail, second or otherwise contract technical advisers to the Government of Chad. If the USG takes part, Deslaimes was confident France could secure German participation, and he expected Japan would likewise follow suit.

4. (C) Deslaimes was nonchalant in describing Deby's health. He said Deby suffered from chronic over-indulgence in Chivaz Regal but also from a medical condition of the liver, "Cyst Hydriatique," common to the Zarghawa and derived from a germ found in mutton. The combined effects were excruciating, Deslaimes imagined, and Deby needed some lifestyle correction. While not dismissing health concerns out of hand, Deslaimes indicated a bullet was likely to prove more lethal.

5. (C) Deslaimes stated that France has a notional vision of how Chad would weather Deby's sudden departure from the political scene, whether due to assassination or illness. He declined to offer details, apart from suggesting any transition was unlikely to be strictly democratic and might parallel proceedings in Mauritania. In any event, Deslaimes counseled that Deby's departure, voluntary or otherwise, was not a scenario to be encouraged. In reference to possible alternative candidates, specifically from tribes in southern Chad, Deslaimes cautioned against viewing Chad along the lines of a Sudan caricature, e.g. as a North-South religious-based conflict where the West had instinctively rallied to southern Christian minorities. That said, he noted the Arabic population in the North expected to take the presidency after Deby, as the next in line in a kind of informal rotation (that he attributed to historical accident.)

6. (C) Guidance Request: Deslaimes asked for any information the USG could share about political activities by Ahmat Soubiane Hassaballah, the former Chadian ambassador to the U.S. whose tenure was cut short once he urged Deby to relinquish office at the end of a second presidential term.

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